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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between the security of children's attachment relationships to parents and teachers and how children negotiate and manage conflicts. Sixty-six preschool-aged children participated in story completion tasks regarding their attachment relationship with parents and teachers, and in hypothetical situations involving preschool-based conflict. The sample was predominantly African American, with a wide range of socioeconomic groups represented. Forty-five percent of the children came from single parent homes. Security of attachment to parents was determined with the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT). A modified version of the ASCT was used to determine attachment of children to their teachers. The findings indicated that those children who were securely attached to their parents had more constructive strategies and resolutions for the hypothetical conflicts than did children with insecure attachments. The security of the children's relationship with their teachers was not related to conflict management skills. Socioeconomic status, gender, and family status were not related to conflict management skills. In general, boys had significantly less secure relationships with both teachers and parents than did girls. (KB)

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The Effects of Secure Attachments on Preschool Children's Conflict Management Skills

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between the security of children's attachment relationship to parents and teachers and how they negotiate and manage conflicts. 66 preschool-aged children participated in story completion tasks regarding their attachment relationship with parents and teachers, and hypothetical conflict situations. It was hypothesized that the security of the attachment relationship with parents and teachers would each be a unique predictor of conflict strategy in preschool children. Results partially supported the hypothesis as those children who were securely attached to their parents had more constructive strategies and resolutions for the hypothetical conflicts. Security of the relationship with children's teachers was not related to conflict management skills.

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The Effects of Secure Attachments on Preschool Children's Conflict Management Skills.

Introduction

Children often lack the necessary conflict management skills to successfully negotiate and resolve conflicts. Recent research supports this claim as it indicates that the majority of conflicts children face are either unresolved or resolved in destructive ways. For children to be successful in school, they need to develop conflict management strategies that allow them to constructively solve the conflicts that confront them in school today.

Aggression is intimately linked with conflict. Children lacking in social skills often resort to aggressive and thus destructive methods in dealing with conflict. Certain factors such as the child's gender, SES and being from a single parent home are thought to put the child at risk for higher levels of aggression. Bowlby's attachment theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how children's intimate relationships with significant adults in their lives influence their social functioning (i.e., conflict management). This framework may provide an explanation for children's aggressive and destructive conflict management behaviors that looks beyond demographic factors.

Past research using Bowlby's attachment theory has indicated that **parent-child** attachment relationships are predictive of social functioning and conflict management. That is, children that are classified as securely attached to their parents are more socially competent with peers and adults. More recent research indicates that the **teacher-child** relationship may also have a significant impact on children's social behavior. Research focusing on the teacher-child relationship also shows beneficial effects of a secure attachment relationship on the child's social functioning.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between children's conflict management skills and their attachment relationship to parents and teachers. It is hypothesized that there will be no difference between teacher and parent attachment relationships in predicting conflict management in preschool children. That is, security of attachment to parents and teachers will both uniquely predict conflict management in a model that includes salient demographic factors, including children's SES, gender, and single parent family status.

Methods

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 66 preschool-aged children residing in a large urban area in the southeastern United States. Forty-four percent of the sample was male and 56% was female, ranging in age from 44 to 70 months, with an average age of 57 months. The sample was predominantly African American (71%) , with 17% Hispanic, 9% Caucasian, and the remainder other races (3%), with a wide range of SES groups represented in a fairly normal distribution. Forty-five percent of the sample came from single parent homes with an average family size of four (see table 1).

Instruments

Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) The ASCT (Bretherton, Ridgeway, and Cassidy, 1990) is a projective measure designed to assess the security of the parent-child attachment relationship. It comprises five stories that tap into significant attachment issues. The tester told and acted out the five stories allowing the child to complete each story at predesignated spots. Testers prompted the subjects by asking them "tell me and show me what happens next." Additional prompts were used to help clarify the child's story (e.g., who did what, when and to whom). Subjects' responses were scored from a four-point scale ranging from (1) insecure to (4) secure. The tester, following careful examination of written transcripts, made an initial rating of the subjects' responses. This was followed by the identical examination of another trained rater who also scored the story. Disagreements were settled by the principal researcher. Inter-rater reliability for the attachment story completion task was .81.

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Teacher Attachment Story Completion Task (TASCT) the TASCT is a modified version of the ASCT in which the stories are modified to reflect situations which tap into the same attachment issues as the ASCT, but that might occur within the context of a school setting. Like the ASCT it comprises 5 stories that are acted out with gender and ethnically appropriate figures representing the teacher and children. Administration and scoring procedures identical to the ASCT were utilized and once again, children's responses were rated on a four point rating scale ranging from (1) insecure to (4) secure depending on how they chose to resolve the story. Inter-rater reliability for these stories was .83.

Conflict Story Completion Task (CSCT) The CSCT is a modified Attachment Story Completion Task with two stories focusing on conflicts that may occur between children in a preschool setting. The administration for the CSCT is identical to that of the ASCT and the TASCT. The first story of the CSCT dealt with control of resources and preferences and the second story dealt with values, beliefs, and the nature of the relationship. Children were given two prompts with regards to the completion of each story, (a) "how will the boy/girl solve this problem?" to ascertain the strategy that the child felt would best solve this problem, and (b) "how will the story end?"in order to find out how the child felt this problem would be resolved.

The subject's strategy was scored on a five-point scale. Scores ranged from least constructive to most constructive. The subject's resolution to the hypothetical conflict was scored on an eight-point scale. Again, scores ranged from least constructive to most constructive. In addition, strategy and resolution scores on the two stories were combined to produce a total strategy and resolution score. Testers scored these stories following an identical procedure as the attachment story completion tasks. Inter-rater reliability for the conflict story completion task was .83.

Single factor scores for the first and second CSCT were derived because strategy and resolution scores from each were highly correlated with each other, implying a single dimension. The resulting factors accounted for between 80 and 86% of the variance respectively, giving a clear single score for first and second conflict story.

Procedure

Children for this study were recruited from several large child care facilities in the area. Parents were contacted and asked for their participation in a study on how children's relationship with significant adult caregivers influences their social behavior in a childcare setting. Near the beginning of the year children participated in two story completion tasks. The first was the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) developed by Bretherton, Ridgeway, and Cassidy (1990) which assessed the security of the relationship with parents. Approximately one week following the ASCT, the Conflict Story Completion Task (CSCT) (Kesner, 1996) was administered to the child. The CSCT dealt with school-based conflicts that the child may encounter. Several months later a second round of story completion tasks was administered to the children. A Teacher Attachment Story Completion Task (TASCT) was utilized to assess the relationship with the teacher instead of the parent. The CSCT was again administered to the children. Again, each story completion task was administered approximately one week apart.

Results

Children's attachment to parents and teachers were strongly correlated ($r = .49$, $p < .001$). To look for significant differences between teacher and parent attachment relationships to their children in terms of children's characteristics, two stepwise multiple regressions were carried out. Stepwise regressions were used due to the high degree to correlation between some of the independent variables. The independent variables in these two models were child gender, single parent family status, and SES. The dependent variable in these models was security of attachment to parents and teachers respectively. Results indicated that in both models the only significant predictor of attachment security was the child's gender. Boys had significantly less secure relationships with both teachers and parents.

A stepwise multiple regression was carried out to determine the ability of the demographic and attachment to parent and teacher variables in predicting conflict management. Once again, stepwise regression

was used to guard against the effects of multicollinearity among independent variables. Results of this stepwise multiple regression yielded a significant model. The only predictor to remain in the model was security of attachment to parent. See Table 2

Discussion

Results indicate that there was a significant difference between teacher-child and parent-child attachment relationships in predicting conflict management in preschool children. Children's attachment relationship to their teacher was not a significant predictor of conflict management. The relationship with the parent did significantly predict conflict management. Children that were securely attached to their parents had more constructive conflict management strategies than those with less secure relationships.

These findings are significant for two reasons. First it signifies the importance of the initial adult-child attachment relationship. The relationship with the parent(s) was the only predictor of how the child chose to resolve a hypothetical conflict. These children had what is usually considered risk factors for development (i.e., single parent status, low SES) yet none of these factors were significant in predicting conflict management. The strong correlation between teacher and parent attachment to children further supports the idea of continuity in the type of relationship that occurs between parent and children into other relationships.

These results are also significant in that the conflict stories involved school-based conflicts, again indicating the significance of the parent(s)-child attachment relationship into other social arenas. Attachment theory contends that early attachment relationships are influential in other areas of social development, and these findings support that contention.

It was also interesting to note that in general boys fared worse in terms of their relationship to both parent(s) and teachers than did girls. This indicates gender differences in attachment relationships. More research is needed into these gender differences to ascertain their magnitude and effects on the child's overall development.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Sample (Children and Parents)

Variable	Child
Age	57 months (4.5)
SES (Hollingshead)	34.6 (13.9)
Family Size	3.7 (1.4)
Family Status	
2 Parents in Home	55%
1 Parent in Home	45%
Gender	
Male	44%
Female	56%
Race	
African American	71%
Asian American	2%
Caucasian	9%
Hispanic	17%
Other	2%

Note: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses following means.

Table 2.
Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Conflict Strategy (N=66)

Variable	B	Standard Error	β
Child-Parent Attachment Security	.06	.03	.25*
Child-Teacher Attachment Security	n/a	n/a	.16
SES	n/a	n/a	.12
Gender	n/a	n/a	.22
Family Status	n/a	n/a	.16

Gender was a dichotomous variable in which 1=male and 0= not male. Family Status was a dichotomous variable in which 1=2 parents in home and 0=1 parent in the home.

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001